

“Be My Baby”—The Ronettes (1963)

Added to the National Registry: 2006

Essay by Cary O'Dell



The Ronettes



Original label



Phil Spector

Instantly infectious and memorable, “Be My Baby” has been described as the “Record of the Century” and the “greatest pop record ever made.” It was recorded by the Ronettes in 1963. It was written by Phil Spector, Jeff Barry and Ellie Greenwich and was produced by Phil Spector. It was named to the National Recording Registry in 2006.

The Ronettes were a group of girls from Spanish Harlem, sisters Veronica (“Ronnie”) and Estelle Bennett and their cousin Nedra Talley. Before becoming a trio, the young women were a group of five joined by two other cousins, Elaine and Diane. (Sometimes they were also joined by their male cousin, Ira.) They sang together and perfected their harmonies at their grandmother’s house before branching out to play local dances and talent contests.

Along with refining their line-up and sound, the girls also defined their look. In his biography of Phil Spector, author Mick Brown says of the group:

The standard demeanor of girl groups of the day was one of demure innocence...But the Ronettes looked as if it was a Saturday night and they were cruising for trouble—figure-hugging dresses, hair piled into improbable beehives and lashings of mascara, which transformed the youthful high school girls into vamps.

Today, the Ronettes are nearly as remembered for their look (which would later be largely carbon-copied by Amy Winehouse) as for their sound.

After first being signed by and recording for the Colpix label (under the name Ronnie and the Relatives), the Ronettes came to the attention of Phil Spector who immediately took a liking to the group and especially to its de facto leader Ronnie. The group signed with Spector’s record label, Philles, in March of 1963.

By 1962, recently married songwriters Jeff Barry and Ellie Greenwich, after each having already scored hits as individuals, teamed up. Together they began to craft some of popular music’s most enduring songs: “Then He Kissed Me,” “Da Doo Ron Ron,” “Christmas (Baby Please Come Home),” “Chapel of Love” and “Leader of the Pack,” among others. With Spector, they also wrote “Be My Baby.”

Music producer Phil Spector spent his youth in the Bronx before moving, at age 12, to LA with his mother. By 1958, he and two friends had formed their own singing group, the Teddy Bears, and had a sizable hit with the Spector-penned “To Know Him Is To Love Him.” The group disbanded soon after and Spector mainly moved behind the scenes. Soon, he became a sought-

after producer and A&R man working with Gene Pitney and other major names. By the early 1960s, Spector began to formulate what would become his signature recording style—"The Wall of Sound." It was a music production technique which involved the overlapping of dozens of separate tracks (five or six guitars, three or more pianos, drums, bells, strings and more) and incorporated reverb and echo chambers to fashion an overwhelming aural wave. Spector has called it "a Wagnerian approach to rock and roll: little symphonies for the kids."

The recording of "Baby" was believed to have been Spector's biggest production up to that time. The recording session lasted over three hours and included dozens of musicians with Hal Blaine's epochal bass drum hits line kicking the single off with a roar. Backing vocals for the Ronettes were provided by, among others, Darlene Love and a young, married singing duo named Sonny and Cher.

Despite the heavy orchestration and dense soundscape, what ultimately resonates about the song is lead singer Ronnie Bennett's piercing vocal, her vibrant vibrato out-echoing the kaleidoscope of instruments and overdubs. It has been said her singing on the song hit the perfect sweet spot between sex and innocence.

Along with being unbelievably catchy and oh-so-danceable, the song's message was straight forward and clear. "Won't you be my baby?" was a far easier inquiry to answer than some of the era's other musical questions like the rueful "Will You Still Love Me Tomorrow?" or the more philosophical "What's a Girl Supposed to Do?"

The "Be my baby?" question seemed to be one that producer Spector and lead singer Ronnie Bennett were asking each other during the recording of the song. Soon after meeting, the two began a passionate love affair. They married in 1968.

Once "Be My Baby" was released in August 1963, at a time when the girl groups were at their peak of popularity, it quickly became a major hit in spite of stiff competition from Martha and the Vandellas's "Heat Wave, the Jaynetts's "Sally Go Round the Roses, the Angels's "My Boyfriend's Back" and "Then He Kissed Me" by Phillies label mates the Crystals. Today, "Be My Baby" is recognized as one of the touchstones of rock and roll and perhaps the best example ever of Spector's revolutionary Wall of Sound style.

"Be My Baby" has since been re-recorded dozens of times since its debut. Among the covers: John Lennon did a version, also produced by Spector, in 1973, and the great Linda Ronstadt stripped it down to a lullaby for her "Dedicated to the One I Love" album in 1997. Along with being incorporated into several film soundtracks, perhaps the song's most famous revival was done by Eddie Money who incorporated its chorus into his 1986 hit "Take Me Home Tonight." For it, Money not only used the verse, he used Ronnie Spector. After being musically introduced in the song with, "Just like Ronnie sang....," Spector's unmistakable voice launched into "Be my...Be my little baby...." Money and Spector would later tour together.

Though "Be My Baby" has remained a potent part of America's listening landscape, the subsequent years for many of the individuals involved in the making of this recording have been difficult.

Though the Ronettes continued to record for Spector, their later releases never matched the success of their first. The group disbanded in the early 1970's. Later, they would sue Spector for unpaid royalties. Ronette Estelle Bennett allegedly later suffered from mental illness and was homeless for a time; she died of colon cancer in 2009. Nedra Talley largely left the music business after she married DJ-turned-Christian Broadcasting Network interviewer Scott Ross and became a mother. After years of turbulence with Phil Spector, during which, according to her, she was often a virtual prisoner in their home, Ronnie Spector divorced him in 1974. She later

sought help for an addiction to alcohol. Today, she still tours. She and the rest of the Ronettes were inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 2007.

For many years, Ellie Greenwich and Jeff Barry continued to grind out the hits including “Chapel of Love” and “River Deep, Mountain High.” They divorced in 1965. Barry wrote and collaborated with others including cartoon pop group the Archies. Today, he continues to work in music, film and television. Greenwich turned to writing TV jingles before being rediscovered via a 1984 Broadway show about her life titled “Leader of the Pack,” its title taken from another of her famous tunes. She died of a heart attack in 2009. As a songwriting team, Greenwich and Barry were inducted into the Songwriter’s Hall of Fame in 1991. In 2009, the duo was honored with induction into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame.

Though Phil Spector would go on to produce singles and albums for Darlene Love, John Lennon, Leonard Cohen, George Harrison and the Ramones, over the years he became much better known for his increasingly eccentric and violent behavior than for his musical output. In 2003, he was arrested for the murder of actress Lana Clarkson whose body was found in the foyer of his LA home. In 2009, he was found guilty of the killing and was sentenced to 19 years to life in prison.

It is a testament to the power and artistry of “Be My Baby” that despite Spector’s extreme and ugly fall from grace, the song remains a timeless feel-good hit, an extraordinary example of not only the Wall of Sound production style but of the rock ‘n’ roll aesthetic.

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